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AUTHOR Flores, Bob; Weeks, William
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ABSTRACT

Peer Advising in Agricultural Education has been operating since the Fall Semester, 1987, at Texas A & M University. The program involves several undergraduate students nominated by faculty, who are supervised by two doctoral students. Responsibilities of the peer advisors include informing students of campus procedures, assisting in prescheduling course work, offer peer advice on questions of a personal and academic nature, giving directions, and being a good listener. From 12-14 students provide the services of peer advisement on weekdays; students volunteer two to four hours weekly. A journal records daily student contacts, including the type of support provided. Over 200 contacts were recorded for the 1987-88 academic year. An unforeseen result of the peer advising program has been the number of contacts that peer advisors make outside the Peer Advisement Center. Peer advisors report that they have been approached by fellow students to a greater degree outside of regularly scheduled hours. Program modifications for the second year are the establishment of minimum criteria for the selection process and changes in the nomination process. (YLB)

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PEER ADVISING IN AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION: A SUPPLEMENT TO FACULTY ADVISING

Bob Flores and William Weeks
Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas

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Introduction and Need

The Department of Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University prides itself on being a "family" of students, staff, faculty, alumni, and friends. A strong sense of community exists among the various groups as they go about their business in their respective roles. Campus traditions and school spirit remain a vital part of the college experience and add to the feeling of comraderie.

An active Collegiate FFA Chapter and a departmental Student Advisory Council provide for a great deal of student/faculty dialogue. The open door policy maintained by faculty also encourages lots of faculty/student interaction. Additionally, the Department provides its students with a lounge, complete with sofas and tables with chairs. As a good number of students frequent this room, it is relatively easy for faculty to interact with many students on a regular basis.

Despite the feeling of "family" and attempts by the faculty to make regular contact with the students in the major, it was felt that a peer advising program, if conducted properly, would be beneficial. The rationale for such a program stemmed from the following factors:

1. The rate of growth in the student population on campus has been rapid, resulting in a lack of time for planning and transition. This has forced students to rely on faculty advisors for clarification of misleading and/or contradictory information provided by peers and campus personnel. The aggressive students occupy more of the

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advisors' time, while less aggressive students are left with unanswered questions or misinformation.

2. The evolution from a program of teacher preparation to a major with two options has enhanced student interest in agricultural education. There are two options available in the Department -- the Teaching Option and the Agricultural Development Option. Considerably more time for student advising is needed with the advent of two options.
3. Computer-assisted registration by telephone has been instituted. Due to limited offerings, classes often reach the enrollment limit and students are sent scrambling for alternative courses. Student traffic reaches a peak on registration days. Some students find it difficult to meet with a professor due to the excessive number of students lining up outside the door to the office.
4. Many students have fewer reservations about sharing concerns with peers than they do with faculty. At the same time, some questions are best answered by students rather than by faculty. An example would be information regarding which instructor to consider taking for a particular course or which courses to consider in fulfilling elective requirements.
5. The success of peer advising programs has been demonstrated at other universities, such as Ithaca College, Iowa State University, Illinois State University, and the University of Wisconsin-Superior.

Idea Design

Peer Advising in Agricultural Education was introduced in the Fall Semester, 1987 and has firmly taken root as a successful program. The program takes advantage of the talents of several undergraduate students nominated by faculty, who are supervised by two doctoral students. The faculty determined the responsibilities of the peer advisors as the

following: inform students of campus procedures, assist in pre-scheduling course work, offer peer advice on questions of a personal and academic nature, give directions, and provide a good ear for listening.

Initiating such a program required a departmental consensus and commitment. The commitment came in the form of faculty assistance and allocation of a peer advising room and resources necessary to provide the service to students. The selection process consisted of faculty nominating students perceived as "model students."

In order to provide the services of peer advisement from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, from 12 to 14 students are selected. Each student is expected to volunteer two to four hours weekly to the program. Once the nomination process is complete, a list is compiled and re-distributed for faculty to rank order. Considerations in the ranking procedure are given to grade point ratio, grade level, involvement in student organizations, personality, ethnicity, and other factors. The rank orders are totaled and the students with the "low scores" are selected. The Department Head sends a letter of invitation to the students along with a reply card. Those accepting the invitation are sent a followup letter informing them of an orientation meeting.

The orientation meeting includes a photo session for publicity purposes. Faculty members are invited to attend the session. The two graduate student coordinators make the arrangements and develop the agenda. The Department Head and the undergraduate faculty advisors explain the peer advising process. Policies for the Peer Advisement Center room are also shared with the peer advisors. Following the meeting, the pictures of the students are mounted on poster board and displayed in a glass case outside the Peer Advisement Center.

Results

Peer advisors have staffed a room in the main corridor of the building housing the Department of Agricultural Education. Each peer advisor serves up to four hours each week. The actual schedule that has developed results in the room being staffed from 30 to 35 hours each week.

A journal to record daily student contacts is kept in the Peer Advisement Center. Peer advisors are asked to record the type of support they provided (personal, course-related, registration, directions, etc.) while keeping the identity of individuals confidential. Over 200 contacts were recorded for the 1987-88 academic year. Forty-one percent involved some sort of pre-registration, course scheduling, or course selection support. Twenty-six percent were related to a student's current course work or current academic situation. Twenty-four percent of the contacts were classified as miscellaneous, ranging from giving directions to providing information on Collegiate FFA activities. Nine percent involved problems of a personal nature.

Two meetings of the peer advising group were held during the course of each semester. The meetings were an attempt to update the peer advisors on campus and departmental activities and to gather feedback on the effects of the program from a student perspective. An unforeseen result of the peer advising program was the number of contacts that peer advisors made outside the Peer Advisement Center. Although no effort has been made to record those contacts, peer advisors reported that they were approached by fellow students to a greater degree outside of regularly scheduled hours at the Peer Advisement Center. The peer advisors have noticed that the faculty selection process and identity as a peer advisor

have resulted in increased contact between the "model students" and their peers.

Toward the conclusion of each semester, the peer advisors were given the opportunity to submit their name for consideration for the upcoming term and to nominate other students. Several peer advisors have taken advantage of the opportunity to nominate themselves and others for consideration. Some of the peer advisors were unable to place their name in nomination because of graduation, student teaching, and other commitments. Then, nominations were solicited from faculty. The nominations from the peer advisors were nearly identical to the list compiled by the faculty. One might be led to believe that the peer advisors took the opportunity to nominate other students very seriously and/or that they were beginning to think just like the faculty! The faculty made the selection using the procedure previously described.

Program Modifications

The Peer Advising Program is now becoming another Aggie tradition as it enters its second year of existence. The faculty are pleased with the success of the program, and students in the Department have expressed similar sentiments.

Prior to the Fall Semester selection of peer advisors, minimum criteria in the selection process were established. The criteria included: 1) students must have successfully completed two semesters of course work in the Department of Agricultural Education, and 2) students must have a grade point ratio of 2.75 or higher.

Special attention has been given to the nomination process. Graduate students who serve as departmental instructors are included in the nomination process because of their contact with students who might not be enrolled in course work taught by the departmental faculty. Once

the rank order process is complete, a meeting of the faculty members is necessary to make the final decision in the selection process.

Plans were also made to provide training in listening skills and counseling techniques to peer advisors. To accomplish this, peer advisors were asked to attend a one day workshop prior to the beginning of the fall semester with training provided by a staff member from the Student Counseling Center.

Resources

A room previously used as a work room was selected as the home of the Peer Advisement Center. The conversion from a work room to a student facility involved a minimal investment. A new coat of paint and acquisition of bulletin boards readied the room. Office furniture stored within the department was relocated to the room. The room renovation was necessary to provide an inviting atmosphere and an environment conducive to peer communication.

The list of items for developing a Peer Advisement Center include, but are not limited to, the following: carpeting, desk, padded chairs, potted plants, bookshelf, telephone, student mailboxes, bulletin boards, a display case in the hallway showing photographs of the peer advisors, permanent name badges for each student, typewriter, university catalogs, class schedules, magazines, office supplies, local telephone directory, campus telephone directory , calendar of events, scholarship and financial aid information, information about professional student organizations, community college catalogs, bus schedules, and maps of the campus and surrounding community.

Why Peer Advisement in Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University?

- Growth in Student Population
- New Option in Agricultural Sciences
- Computer Assisted Registration
- Peers Listen to Peers
- History of Success

Peer Advisement
Extending the "Family" Concept

- Faculty Commitment

  Assistance by Faculty
  Coordinated by Graduate Students
  Allocation of Resources

Peer Advisement
Extending the "Family" Concept

- Selection by Faculty

  Nomination
  Ranking
  Selection

Peer Advisement
Extending the "Family" Concept

- Invitation

  Sent by Department Head
  Mailed to Student's Home

Peer Advisement
Extending the "Family" Concept

- Orientation

  Faculty Participation
  Cooperation with Counseling Center
  Development of Schedules

Peer Advisement: Resources Needed

- Attractive Room
- Appropriate Office Furniture
- Office Supplies
- Bulletin Boards
- Telephone
- College Catalogs, Class Schedules
- Maps